PART TWO

BALAAM IN ANCIENT JUDAISM
Balaam in the Dead Sea Scrolls

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According to Martin Abegg’s Concordance, Balaam appears once in the non-biblical Qumran scrolls in Hebrew, in 4Q175 1:9,1 and another time in an Aramaic text,2 in 4Q339, on a list of the false prophets who arose in Israel, among whom ‘Balaam, son of Beor, the old man from Bethel’ is the first.3 However, if we look a little further than this meagre attestation, we may find that the use of the Balaam story at Qumran may help us develop our understanding of the biblical narrative, which is our central concern here.

When one looks at the basis of the narrative development, two different stories seem to be told in Numbers 22–24. In the one account, Balaam is considered in a rather positive light; his conduct is seen as blameless. He is not an Israelite of course but a kind of magician to whom ‘the money of divination’ must be paid (Num 22:7). However, he does obey YHWH’s orders and prophesizes what God commands him to. In the other account, following rabbinic tradition, Balaam has a thoroughly negative image: for example, he commits sodomy with his ass, loses his share in the world-to-come and harmful snakes arise from his rotten bones. Indeed, other biblical texts have been highly influential in the development of this negative image, such as Num 31:15–16 where Moses recalls the counsel attributed to Balaam, ‘Let the women do the work and Israelites will be defeated’. In fact this negative image is very old since, according to Gilles Dorival in his commentary on Numbers in La Bible d’Alexandrie, the ‘demonisation’ of Balaam is already evident in the Greek translation of Numbers 22–24: ‘La LXX de Nb est plus défavorable à Balaam que le TM: s’il est un inspiré, il n’est pas un prophète pour Seigneur’.4

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2 Abegg, Bowley & Cook, Dead Sea Scrolls Concordance. Volume One, 800.
3 M. Broshi & A. Yardeni, Qumran Cave 4. XIV Parahbiblical Texts. Part 2 (Discoveries in the Judean Desert XIX), Oxford 1995, 77–9, Plate XI.